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Thomas Rees Davies: A Centenary

THE centenary of the death of Rev. Thomas Rees Davies on June 26 passed without a comment, almost. As far as I know the only public tribute to his memory was paid in a short address at the weekly prayer meeting at Tabernacll, Llandudno, by Mr. R. W. Jones on June 29. A synopsis of this address was published in the Welsh Baptist Weekly, *Seren Cymru* on July 17, 1959.

I first encountered the name and face of Thomas Rees Davies in my home in Carmarthenshire when I was a boy. The house was pretty well alive with Baptist celebrities, past and present. Pride of place went to centenary photographs of the local church and its ministers. Then came contemporary prophets in the Principality at large, well over a hundred of them at their shining best. In another room there was a framed Missionary Calendar with the title in Welsh: "Hold the Ropes", and Timothy Richard and Evan Morgan, China; W. R. James, India; and Thomas Lewis, Congo; among others, were symmetrically placed to form a border, literally roped in. The oldest picture gallery was of a handful of Welsh Baptist fathers, of whom I remember distinctly Christmas Evans, John Herring, William Richards (Lynn), and Thomas Rees Davies. (I understand that this particular group is less in public favour than it was, and the Secretary of the Welsh Baptist Union would welcome it as a gift for Ilston House, Swansea, if there is a single survivor after the war salvage drives.) Thomas Rees Davies stood out among the ten or dozen worthies because of the black cap on his head, and the spectacles resting above his forehead on the cap. Other details stuck, too, the bushy eyebrows, the granite face, and the double-breasted waistcoat. Many years were to pass before I was to encounter a full-length portrait of Thomas Rees Davies (in *The History of the Baptists of Llandudno District*) with a Bible at his elbow on a rather florid plush table-cloth, his hands crossed on his knee, his shapely leg in exquisite side-buttoned trousers. The black cap must have been exceptional in his life-time, for he was known among the contemporaries as "The Black Cap" (a term with a less pleasant connotation in England, I understand).

There has been no satisfactory biography, but in 1860, W. M. Evans, Carmarthen, printed (in Welsh) a 104 page work :

The Biography of the Reverend Thomas Rees Davies, Glanwydden; commenced by himself and completed (on request) by H. W. Hughes: with a statistical pre-ample including a Review of the last sixty years in connection with the Baptist Denomination in Wales; with the numerical strength of the Communion; also a selection of divine gems, a memorial ode, poetical remains, addresses, etc., etc.

A problematic quotation also adorns the title-page :

*"Let us speak of a man as we find him,
And heed not what others may say."*

The twelve pages of preface matter dealing with Baptist witness in Wales from 1800 to 1860 is a chronicle of Baptist successes in the war against Socinianism, Sandemanianism, Campbellism, "and many other strange isms". Whereas in 1800 there were only 80 churches in the whole of Wales, in 1860 there were 467 (with a membership of 62,246).

The autobiography is short (only four small pages, the first three paragraphs in English, the remainder in Welsh). The English introduction is as follows :

Thos. Rees Davies was born at Penwenallt, Parish of Kilgeran, County of Pembroke, South Wales, on the 9th day of May, 1790; and baptized in the river Morgenau, at Felin Garnet Bridge, by the Rev. Benjamin Davies, of Nantyreryd, minister of Cilvowir, on the 22nd day of June, 1806, after a sermon on the occasion by the Rev. Evan Jones, of Cardigan; and the Rev. Gabriel Rees, of Rhydwylym, did preach in the chapel of Cilvowir.

And he, T.R.D., began to preach the gospel of Christ the next winter, before the end of the year 1806, at Cilvowir, etc., Went to North Wales in 1811. His ordination was held at Cilvowir, on the 9th day of March, 1814. His charge was given by his uncle Dd. Rees, of Froghole, the charge to the church by Wm. Evans, Cwmfelin; and a sermon to the congregation by Thos. Jones, Rhydwylym. Wm. Pritchard, Penypark, and John Herring, of Cardigan and Dd. Phillips, Blaenwaun, did preach the evening before.

And I am now in North Wales, at Salem, Llansantffraid, Glanconway, Roe, Glanwydden, Llandudno, Bettws, Dawn, and Eglwysfach, since 1812, 19 months before my ordination. Thanks be to God.

At this point he breaks abruptly into Welsh, and relates how he had a little early schooling at Llechryd, Capel Newydd and Cardigan (under Reverend Evan Jones, "He was a very good scholar, and he had a big school; I shall be indebted to him for ever for the education I received from him"). The Academy at Abergavenny had been opened about this time, but his parents "for some reasons they had" stood in his way to go there. He educated himself, however, and took good care to listen to the religious leaders of the period (he refers, for example, to "old Jones, Llangan", and Rev. Thomas Charles, of Bala). He preached his

first sermon before the end of 1806, and at the age of sixty-seven, "after trying to preach for fifty-one years", he recalls how poor a performance it was, "so that I had decided to give up once and for all". After a fortnight of "worry, shame, and prayer" he ventured the second time, and after that there was no turning back. The custom at that time was to win your spurs "in small meetings" at home, take Sunday services "under the authority of the church" in the branches, and then go out to neighbouring churches with an elder minister. T.R.D. went out with David Evans, Cilvowir "as a *footman* for over a year" in his home district, and later with David Davies, Rehoboth, on tours away from home. ("He was a good old Christian: we were sometimes on our journey for a whole week.") In 1811 he and Simon Jones, both barely twenty-one, ventured to North Wales. T.R.D. preached his first Association sermon at Amlwch, Anglesey.

This was the first Association where I tried to say anything; but scores of times afterwards . . . Brother Christmas Evans liked us very much, and pressed upon us to stay in the North. . . . Simon Jones stayed that year in Lleyn, Caernarvonshire. . . . I went with Rev. Thos. Davies, Cefnbychan on to Denbighshire. The Sabbath I was in Roe, Fforddlas, and Glanwydden. The brethren there besought me eagerly to come and settle among them, though they were only a few. In the Roe at the time there was nobody but Sian Peters, and only one member in Tudno Island.

He promised to come in a year's time, and in 1812 he came back, making Glan Conway his base of operations. At that time Roe (Ro-Wen, now closed) and Ffordd-las were the only two chapels between Anglesey and Llanrwst. There was not a single one in the whole of Welsh Flintshire (in 1959 it is a county without a single minister in charge of a church). T.R.D. preached in farm houses and in the homes of ordinary people, "doors open in every district, so that for a few years it was almost the exception to sleep two consecutive nights in the same bed". There were only thirty-five members in twelve parishes, but soon there were chapels in Llandudno, Glanwydden, Eglwysfach, Codau, Llangernyw and Llanddulas, and a little later in Llanddoged, Llansannan, Llanefydd, and Bontnewydd: "Much perspiration did I lose in all these places, before there was a chapel in any of them, when I was young and in my prime".

It was on March 9th, 1814, that he was ordained, in Cilfowir: "I had to go there from the North, to the 'Mother Church' to receive the 'ordination', in order to satisfy them, so that they would have the right, they said, 'to call him back whenever he would be needed'."

The last paragraph of his autobiographical sketch is particularly gripping:

After this I began to baptize in almost every river, lake and stream from Conway to Llansannan, and from Llanrwst to Bontnewydd, from the sea of Llandudno to the mountain of Berwyn, consecrating all their waters. I baptized in these years, 1814-15-16 and -17, some who became useful as deacons and ministers in the churches, such as John Prichard, now of Llangollen, and John Griffiths, Llandudno, two very good men—I baptized both in the same month, and John Morris, Cwmifor, at Glyn Ceiriog, long afterwards, and many who became preachers, as it were.

For the record, a few significant details may be added. On June 4th, 1814, he married Miss Ann Foulks, the daughter of Mr. Robert Foulks, Peniarth Fawr, a well-to-do land owner, at Llangwstenin parish church. In 1818 there was an unfortunate clash between him and some of the members at Glandwydden over a trust deed, and for eight years he preached among the Wesleyans.

In 1826 he was reinstated by his old denomination, and ministered at Glyn Ceiriog (1827-29), Stanhope Road, Liverpool (1829-35), and Cilgeran (1835-43), before returning to Glandwydden, to spend the remainder of his days as a travelling evangelist.

Thomas Rees Davies deserves to be remembered as a very active propagator of the Baptist faith in the first half of the last century, especially in North Wales. He not only taught the principles, moreover, but gave practical proof of his convictions by lending money (even if it was his wife's) to struggling communities facing the task of building chapels against great odds. A contemporary, Daniel Jones, Tongwynlais, writes of him a few months after his death "Who did more for weak churches than Thomas Rees Davies, by lending them money on their chapels, when others were not ready to do so? It is well known that it was raggedly enough that he got a little interest on his money—count the chapels from Bagillt to Conway".

It is interesting that his slightly cynical biographer, H. W. Hughes, defends his good name against a charge of niggardliness :

All who knew Thomas Rees Davies knew he was under the heavy oppression of excessive frugality, but he had good schooling in that art in the north; . . . and the churches that complained that he was too learned on this head can thank themselves for teaching him.

Daniel Jones also defends him :

Some would set Thomas Rees Davies out as one too attached to the things of this world . . . considering his station as a servant of Jesus. I think that had been suspected because he excelled most of us in his attention to small matters. . . . In his own home, and at his table, he was most kind and cheerful . . . he was very much against waste . . . and it would be a mercy to God's church, and to the world, if many in these days followed his example in frugality in eating, drinking and dress.

It is as a preacher, however, that he is still best remembered. For better or for worse he was one of the fore-runners of a host of itinerant preachers whose Association and "Union" and "big meeting" sermons have been woven into our Baptist pattern of public witness for the past century and a half. He is reputed to have preached 13,145 times (a remarkably "exact" total recorded even in the article by Rev. L. E. Valentine in the Cymmrodorion *National Biography*). The late Dr. H. Cernyw Williams in his biography of Dr. Hugh Jones, Llangollen, says that he was privileged to hear Thomas Rees Davies scores of times, and that he possessed extraordinary preaching gifts, using even his stammer to advantage. In Dr. Owen Thomas' classic biography of Rev. John Jones, Talysarn, there is a remarkable tribute to Thomas Rees Davies as a powerful and vivid preacher. "The presence, the voice, the manner, and the sermon" left a lasting impression upon the mind of the hearer, who was only ten years of age at the time, and after fifty-one years he could remember the gist of the sermon, the 'heads' and the peroration. "All must agree," he says, "that here was an extraordinary example of popular eloquence . . . There is no doubt that some of the chief elements of the powerful and effective preacher, and that to a considerable extent, met in Thomas Rees Davies."

H. R. Hughes gives a selection of 'gems' from his sermons. Here are a few examples :

I do not know what most astounds us, men's shamelessness in treating the Son of God, or his patience in bearing with them.

Water is sure to keep its level. Since the water of life springs from God's throne, anything that threatens it must rise as high as the throne before it can challenge it.

Let us learn to die like ones who are to live eternally; and to live as ones who die daily.

It would pay us to remember the example of John the Baptist in preaching—preaching his Master, not himself; he who comes after me is more than I.

Augustine desired three things—to see Rome in its glory, Paul in his pulpit, and Christ in the flesh. I would desire three things before I die—the destruction of AntiChrist, the kingly rule of Christ, and the binding of Satan.

The things of the world want to cling to us, and we to them.

It is impossible for us to cleave to Christ, and to desert His people. Ignorance is the devil's own college.

Some churches and their ministers are like wanton women with their husbands—they would rather see anybody else come home.

Generally, they who come to God's house on the Sabbath day only, finish by not coming on the Sabbath either.

If the meeting is hard, share the blame.

The last three weeks of Thomas Rees Davies' long and energetic preaching ministry was spent in Monmouthshire and Glamorgan-shire. The end came dramatically. On June 22nd, 1859, he preached his last sermon at the Association at Caersalem Newydd, Swansea, on the text *Hebrews* ii 3: "How can we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" He died the next morning at the house of the minister of Bethesda, Swansea, where, twenty-one years previously his great predecessor and hero, Christmas Evans had passed away. A most significant list of coincidences and likenesses in the careers of the two great preachers mentioned in Hughes' biography bears quotation at the centenary of the death of Thomas Rees Davies:

Two men (one twenty years after the other) born in the same part of the country, both taking up the same principles; called to the same work, both giants in stature, and much alike in gifts; both settling in North Wales; both returning to the South and spending the same number of years there; both returning to North Wales to finish their ministry; both dying on a journey in the South; both dying in the same town; after being ill in the same house; dying almost at the same age, and buried in the same grave.

For Welsh Baptists, that common grave at the entrance to Bethesda, Swansea, is no ordinary shrine.

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